

**Gender and Its Implications for Abuse Variations within Adolescence**

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### Gender and Its Implications for Abuse Variations Among Adolescents

If given the opportunity to go back and relive your adolescence, would you? Many shutter at the mere idea of such a thought. Hence, one need not perform any research to understand that adolescence can be a traumatic period in one's life. Instead, they need only reflect back to their own experience as a teen and remember. Even if you were one of the lucky few who did not have to spend the first half of your early twenties recovering from such mayhem, you can still certainly empathize with the struggles that characterize this time period. Asserting a level of independence, having to maneuver through the landmines of precarious peer relations, coming to terms with one's sexuality, and battling perceptions of self image are all commonalities encountered by most throughout some point of adolescence. Unfortunately for some, these are only a few of the issues with which adolescents contend. A segment of the adolescent population must also endure physical and/or emotional abuse perpetrated by their parents or caregiver.

For those working within the field of child protection, this issue has special relevance and evokes specific questions pertaining to the nature of adolescent maltreatment. In particular, the question of whether gender variations exist within adolescent abuse and neglect will be posed. If any variations are present, an attempt shall be made to determine if a certain form of maltreatment may be associated with a particular gender.

### Review of the Literature

The goal of this paper will be to explore the issues surrounding adolescent physical and emotional abuse. In doing so, several issues will be discussed including how others have defined

the problem, the estimated rates of incidence, variations between genders, and the impact of such maltreatment. To conclude, this paper will identify the areas in which research is lacking.

### *Defining Abuse*

Throughout the years, a vast body of research has been developed in the area of child abuse; however, in the last thirty years the incidence of adolescent abuse has been given more attention (Rees & Stein, 1997). According to Rees and Stein (1997), beginning in the late 1970's U.S. interest in abused adolescents started to develop as a response to the young runaway phenomenon. Rees and Stein (1997) explain the sizable differences existing between child abuse and adolescent abuse that soon began to take shape. It seems that while there was growing consensus regarding a need for a specific understanding of such an adolescent experience, there was still vigorous debate regarding the definition of maltreatment (Rees & Stein, 1997).

In exploring a general definition of physical abuse, Kaplan, Pelcovitz, and Labruna (1999) state that, "physical abuse [is] present when a child younger than age 18 years has experienced injury, or risk of injury as a result of having been hit with a hand or other object or having been kicked, shaken, thrown, burned, stabbed, or choked by a parent or parent-substitute"(p.1). Emotional abuse in contrast, is defined as, "verbal abuse, harsh nonphysical punishments, or threats of maltreatment"(Kaplan, Pelcovitz & Labruna, 1999, p. 2). It is important to note that while emotional maltreatment is found in an exceeding number of physical abuse cases, it is also exists independently of other forms of maltreatment (Kaplan, Pelcovitz, & Labruna, 1999). Understanding what constitutes both physical and emotional abuse is just one element needed in exploring this phenomenon. An awareness of the dynamics involved in adolescent abuse and how it differs from its more child specific counterpart is also important.

### *Rates of Incidence*

Adolescent abuse differs from child abuse in not only its incident rate, but also its level of reporting, patterns of occurrence, and family dynamics in which it is surrounded (Rees & Stein, 1997). In addition, research shows that adolescent abuse also varies by those who perpetrate (Kaplan, Pelcovitz, and Labruna, 1999).

To begin, Rees and Stein (1997) conclude, the adolescent population comprises only 25 percent of abuse and neglect cases reported to Child Protective Services, yet make-up over 42 percent of cases substantiated. Doueck, Ishisaka, and Greenaway (1988) detail similar estimates which hold that while adolescent abuse accounts for only one-fourth of official abuse and neglect reports, they constitute nearly 47% of victims. By these standards, it may be fair to assume that adolescent abuse is either seriously under-reported and appears at a higher rate than child abuse or it actually occurs at a lesser rate. In fact, one may even logically infer that an increase in the adolescent's communication skills and budding independence account for more reliable evidence. Rees and Stein also (1997) claim that while reports from the 1980's reveal that higher levels of serious injury and fatality occurred to adolescents, recent reports suggest that 90 percent of child abuse fatalities occur with child under the age of five.

#### *Patterns of Abuse*

In coming to terms with the patterns of abuse believed to exist within the adolescent age group, Rees and Stein (1997) describe two particular patterns in which most adolescent abuse falls. These patterns include both chronically and non-chronically abused adolescents (Rees & Stein, 1997). Chronically abused adolescents suffer from long-term maltreatment while non-chronic abuse begins with the onset of adolescence (Rees & Stein, 1997). Experts theorize that adolescents suffering from chronic abuse may have more profound behavioral problems and therefore may need specifically targeted interventions (Rees & Stein, 1997).

*Family dynamics*

Other factors which differentiate child abuse from adolescent abuse pertain to differing family dynamics (Rees & Stein, 1997). Families with adolescents are often in a period of life-phase transitioning and therefore susceptible to high levels of stress (Doueck, Ishisaka, & Greenaway, 1988). Crosson-Tower (2002) describes how during the period of adolescence, abusive parents may often be in competition with their children and as a result come to perceive their children's accomplishments as a threat. Crosson-Tower (2002) goes on to state that abuse occurring during adolescence may result from a parent's loss of control. During this period, frustration and fear often result in the parent striking out (Crosson-Tower, 2002). Separation is yet another factor which Crosson-Tower (2002) contend plays a part with adolescent abuse. In this scenario, an insecure parent may be fused with their offspring so that fear and rejection result in conflict (Crosson-Tower, 2002).

Rees and Stein (1997) provide another perspective which maintains that adolescent abuse is more prevalent within "authoritarian" and "permissive" families (p.66). In this manner, it has been proposed that adolescent abuse is less likely to occur with families who are "authoritative" and exhibit clear boundaries (Rees & Stein 1997, p.66).

Finally, there are several other miscellaneous factors that contribute to the differences between child and adolescent abuse. The adolescent's ability to retaliate as well as their physical durability is just two of these factors (Rees & Stein, 1997). In addition, it seems that while child abuse is believed to be relegated to families with lower income, adolescent abuse has been found evenly throughout the socioeconomic spectrum (Rees & Stein, 1997).

*Gender Differences in Adolescent Abuse*

In regards to the perpetration of adolescent violence, there is reason to believe that gender plays a role, the extent to which is unclear. Rees and Stein (1997) state that birth mothers most frequently perpetrate physical abuse on adolescents while homicide statistics conclude that, “fathers commit 63 percent of parent-perpetrated homicides occurring in 13-15 year-olds, and 80 percent of those occurring in 16 to 19 year-olds (Kaplan, Pelcovitz & Labruna, 1999, p.3). Such findings may lead one to assert that much complexity and contradiction exists within this area of research.

Gender differences also exist with those adolescents perpetrated against. Rees and Stein (1997) state that while some believe girls have a higher rate of adolescent physical abuse, others contend the higher percentage is held by boys. It seems that much research is still needed in this area.

One place where research does not seem to be lacking is in the area of consequences suffered by adolescent victims. Much evidence supports the detrimental effects incurred by adolescents as a result of physical and emotional abuse. Rees and Stein (1997) have listed the following factors as possible consequences of adolescent abuse; academic problems, drug problems, aggression, suicide attempts, delinquency, pregnancy, prostitution and run away. Kaplan, Pelcovitz and Labruna (1999) further support such claims by stating that adolescents with a history of abuse are reported to have an increased risk of psychiatric disorders such as anxiety, conduct, and substance abuse. In addition, researchers also contend that, “women who have suffered abuse in childhood and/or adolescence often become involved in an abusive relationship as an adult (Beth, 1999, p. 48).”

It is clear after a review of the literature that continued research needs to be done in the area of adolescent abuse. In addition, special attention should be given to the gender differences associated with this problem.

It will be the intent of this author to contribute to the preexisting knowledge established and perhaps even draw further conclusions regarding physical and emotional abuse to adolescents.

### Methodology

In an attempt to accomplish the above stated task, four primary areas will be explored. These four areas, which comprise the methodology section, will guide the research process and lay the foundation for how one's research will be carried out.

#### *Research Design and Data Collection Procedures*

Case files held within the Department of Community Based Services were reviewed and data was collected from those with substantiated abuse and or neglect. In doing so, the researcher was able to acquire information from a larger number of participants; thereby increasing the validity of the findings.

#### *Characteristics of the Participants*

Participants include those children between the ages of 12-18 who have a substantiated case of physical/emotional abuse or neglect with Child Protective Services. Gender is a factor that will be accounted for in making research determinations while the "race" of the participants will not be taken into consideration.

#### *Sampling Design*

A nonprobability sampling design was utilized as a way to determine which participants would be selected for review. In this manner, such purposive sampling allowed the researcher to

handpick the participants based on availability. In addition, criterion sampling was employed so that participants would meet the criteria for the study. This method was chosen out of the need for an available sample.

#### *Description of Instrumentation*

Although nonprobability sampling is most often used with qualitative data collection, this was not the approach taken within this study. Instead, quantitative data was gathered through viewing an indirect source. Information was transferred from the agency's computerized case files and placed on a customized tracking sheet. Substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect could then be counted and differentiated between boys and girls.

#### *Findings*

In determining whether gender variations exist within adolescent maltreatment a brief examination of the research findings will be presented. These findings will be explored by viewing the data collected. In viewing this information, data will be categorized according to maltreatment and gender. In this manner, determinations may be made regarding the existence of correlations between the factors. To conclude, problems encountered within the research will be discussed.

#### *Neglect Rates*

After collecting and sorting data from twenty-six cases, a Chi-Square test revealed that no significant difference was detected between the male and female rates of neglect. Within the female sample 78.6% had been neglected. The male sample had similar figures with 83.3% percent having been neglected. Hence, provided the findings no variation is believed to exist within these two groups.



*Physical Abuse*

Data collection and a Chi-Square test determined that no detectable significance was present between the male and female sample in terms of physical and emotional abuse. Within the female sample 28.6% had experienced one of varying forms of abuse. The male sample had a comparable figure, with 25% having endured abuse. Thus, just as with the neglect findings no variations were found.

*Obstacles within the Research*

Throughout this research various obstacles plagued its completion. First, issues involving sample size were of great concern. Obtaining records from recent substantiated cases of abuse and neglect proved more difficult than previously assumed. While the team from which the records derived primarily investigates adolescent maltreatment, they also receive cases in overflow involving children under the age of twelve. In viewing these files it appears as though workers substantiate such cases at a much quicker rate than cases involving adolescents. Thus, since fewer adolescent cases were substantiated, gathering data proved more arduous than initially thought.

Another un-estimated variable regarding the sample size pertained to a recent policy change within the Cabinet for Health and Family Services. In years past, a family in need of services required a worker to substantiate allegations. Currently, a worker is not obligated to substantiate maltreatment in order for a family to still receive services. This is now classified as a FINSA (Family In Need of Services) and has subsequently decreased the number of substantiated cases. Nevertheless, this factor also played a role in the researcher's ability to find a feasible sample size.

In addition to sample size, several other factors encountered within this research also limited one's ability to generalize the findings. For example, the researcher did not take into account the inherent biases in the social workers' findings. Since all the findings were derived from a single investigative team, several issues prove making determinations problematic. To begin, close personal relationships and training within a team could result in all workers having similar procedures and methods for determining case outcomes. As a result, all of the cases derived from the same team may have very similar substantiations. Also, the team's supervisor holds great influence on the types of cases which are substantiated. If a supervisor has a tendency not to substantiate particular cases, this will definitely have an impact on the worker's findings. With this in mind, one may see how substantiated cases found within the cabinet's records may not be indicative of actual abuse and neglect incidents within the general population. For that matter, a final consideration must be made in assessing problems encountered within the research.

Regardless of the team investigating, the rate of substantiated cases may not be entirely indicative of the amount of actual maltreatment within society. While utilizing Child Protective Service case records as a way to gauge the occurrence of maltreatment within a population may be a logical step, findings should always be viewed with a critical perspective. One might assume that all child maltreatment is underreported and therefore it may be impossible to draw definitive conclusions from CPS reports.

Finally, just as with any research, researcher bias has the potential to affect outcomes. With this being quantitative data there may not have been as much room for error; however, the possibility also exists.

### Conclusions

In view of the findings an attempt shall be made to explain the information gleaned from the research. In doing so, plausible explanations will be proposed regarding the outcome of the research. Implications for social work practice will also be briefly touched upon in hopes of bringing needed reform to the child protection arena.

Finally, further research possibilities will be explored so that new information may be obtained.

### *Discussion*

Prior to performing the research, it was theorized that gender variations may exist within particular forms of adolescent maltreatment. In particular, the existence of correlations between boys and girls and the rates in which physical abuse and neglect occurs was pondered. Since the findings concluded that no difference existed between boys and girls in relation to a particular form of maltreatment other explanations may be posed in an attempt to bring clarity to the research.

The first assumption one might make in an attempt to understand the findings holds that perhaps variations with maltreatment depend more on parental variables rather than on adolescent. Hence, parental patterns in terms of chronic verses non-chronic maltreatment could play more of a role in making determinations.

In viewing adolescent variables another possibility might hold that forms of maltreatment occur as a result of personality traits within adolescents. In this scenario, assuming non-chronic maltreatment conditions are present, perhaps a more rebellious teen might experience greater amounts of physical abuse regardless of their gender.

### *Implications*

As with performing any research, the goal should always be to apply learned knowledge to practice. In this case, not being able to generalize information might be as valuable as if one were able. Keeping a fresh perspective regarding allegations of physical abuse and neglect is always important. In fact, some may find it counterproductive to assess a family with a preconceived ideas regarding who may be victimized by particular forms of maltreatment.

#### *Further Research*

Provided the small sample and the challenges present in generalizing the data, there is much work to do in terms of building on this research. The most obvious of tasks would be to obtain a larger sample. In doing so, a sample should be gathered by reviewing case files acquired from multiple teams of social workers. If one were truly ambitious, it might prove beneficial to gather data from two separate state agencies. As a result, a broader sample could be ensured, thereby increasing one's ability to generalize such data to the population.

In addition to having a larger sample, it might also be interesting to include the pattern of maltreatment in the research. In this manner, the researcher might be able to draw conclusions regarding adult variables.

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